

The First Nudie Musical (Blu-ray)

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

When we did the DVD of *The First Nudie Musical*, we had to cobble it together from three different 35mm prints, because a search for the camera negative or CRI had come up empty. The only print that was in optimal condition was completely color faded. The other prints had about sixty percent of their color, so we were able to fix that somewhat within the technology available back in 2002. But we were still faced with scratches, dirt, and even a splice or two. We did the best we could, but it was so far above any other video incarnation at that point that we were all very pleased. We certainly weren't the only transfer out there with scratches and dirt, and at least the film was finally being seen in its proper ratio.

Flash forward one year – I was offered another 35mm print of the film, this one with about seventy-percent of its color intact (the prints with any color were all done on Fuji stock) – that print had light scratches but was in great shape and, in fact, we used it for a screening of the film at the American Cinematheque in Hollywood during their tribute to musicals of the 1970s.

Flash forward two years. I get a call from a film dealer who'd bought up all the contents stored at some lab. And amongst the contents were about eight 35mm prints of our film and, amazingly, the CRI (the internegative from which prints are made), along with the optical soundtrack negative. I couldn't believe it. The film's co-director, Mark Haggard ended up buying all the stuff and storing it in Arizona, where he lived. He said I could buy it from him whenever I needed to. I began thinking about doing a Blu-ray of the film in 2010 and called him that summer. Flash-forward to this year – Mark was moving and didn't want to lug all this stuff, so he just sent me everything. And so, I finally had an element, a negative that was only one generation away from the camera negative.

We did some further checking, just to make sure the camera negative couldn't be found, and again came up empty. I called Robert A. Harris, a friend and one of the heroes of film preservation, and told him what I had. He warned me that CRIs were notoriously susceptible to fading. That made me nervous, of course. But he also said if an image could be harvested from the CRI it would look great, and that having the camera negative wouldn't necessarily yield much better results, image-wise. He graciously arranged for me to take the CRI to Kodak's Pro-Tek, his inspec-

tion facility of choice, and said, "What you want to look for are green facial highlights – if they're green you'll be fine."

I nervously went to the lab, cans in hand. The Pro-Tek technicians put up reel one and the first good news is that the CRI looked to be in really good condition. When we got to actual image I saw green. Green was good. Green made me very happy. We checked a couple of other reels and they had green. The tech who was checking it said we were very lucky because this CRI was an anomaly and that he was really surprised that a CRI from 1976 would have any color left. So, armed with that good news, the film went over to Foto-Kem for the transfer.

I was not going to not do this right and I knew it wouldn't be cheap, so I did what a lot of people are doing these days – a Kickstarter fund-raising project. We were able to raise half the money for the digital restoration and transfer, which was a huge help. I sat with a wonderful transfer and colorist guy named Jon Rocke. We began with reel one – I got a little nervous when I saw the first image, but within seconds I was looking at an image with perfect color. We put up the DVD to compare and it was amazing how much more accurate he was able to get the color – the DVD, which we'd all thought had pretty good color, suddenly seemed brown and lifeless. The other good news is that there were only occasional light scratches and dirt – really minor – most of the CRI was spotless. There was grain and, in some scenes, a lot of grain because *Nudie Musical* was a very low-budget film and that's the way it's always been. Grain is interesting. Some people hate it (including a lot of the great cameramen – it was simply something they had to live with), some people love it, thinking it gives film transfers texture and detail. I don't mind a little grain, but every film is different and sometimes studios use DNR to remove some grain (a little or a lot, depending on who's doing it), and then they use edge enhancement to sharpen the image, since when you use DNR it softens the image.

As we were watching, I was so happy with the detail that I decided we would use no DNR or edge enhancement whatsoever. That meant that the opticals were going to be somewhat grainy, and that certain scenes shot in lower light were going to be somewhat grainy, but that's the way the film was shot and that's the way I wanted the transfer to be. We went shot by shot for the color correction – and we were finally able to have this film reflect what the actual sets and costumes looked like when we shot them. I know this because I had several perfect 35mm

slides and I still had some of the wardrobe from the film. I'm a fan of saturated color, which is why I love the saturated MGM musicals shot in Technicolor or printed in dye transfer Tech. When we shot *Nudie Musical*, Technicolor had just stopped printing in dye transfer the year before. Our release prints never had color that I liked – I was not around for the timing of the prints – I believe our producer handled all that. They looked okay, but were not saturated enough. The musical numbers had garishly colored sets with pinks and yellows and purples, and finally they look like they looked, and what a treat that was.

I'd always wanted the beginning of "The Lights And The Smiles" song to be very yellow – as if the sun were really making Susie glow with that wonderful California sunshine – it was sort of like that in the DVD but we made it more like that for the Blu-ray – the idea that cutting from the golden/yellow sunshine to the neon-lit night shots on Hollywood Boulevard would be really strong. And now that finally looks the way I always wanted it to. It was so wonderful to watch the shots come to life as Jon worked his magic. There's a scene where I do a wild dance as John Smithee – you could suddenly see that my sweater was green (I still have it, by the way) – it's always looked brown or, worse, just indistinctly dark. And so it went.

When we finished, we watched it from start to finish and it was as if the film had been reborn. It was a thrill. Then it was time to do the sound. They made a transfer off the optical negative – it was shrill, distorted, harsh, and ugly. Aside from that, it was fine. So, obviously that was a little scary, but it was explained to me that optical sound negatives were not that good for transfer use – they were designed for contact printing. So, I brought in my mint but completely faded 35mm print and we put that up to do a test. Again, shrill, distorted, harsh, and ugly. Now, keep in mind that the mono sound of *Nudie Musical* was never great, never state of the art. And the DVD sound reflected that, too. The engineer said we'd probably have to go through an extensive audio restoration process – by this time the costs were zooming up so fast that I didn't quite know how we were going to do that. I went home, trying to figure it all out when I got a call from the engineer – he'd had an idea – to put the film on a different sound reader, an older model, one that handled older films better. And voila. He played me a test and the sound was suddenly reasonable – not shrill, not ugly, not harsh, with little distortion, and, while it was never going to sound like a big-budget film, it did suddenly sound like the film had sounded thirty-six years ago.

After we did the audio session, the transfer went to the folks who do the clean up. We'd budgeted for a more than reasonable number of hours to do the minor stuff that needed to be done and left enough time to deal with two issues that I really wanted to ad-

dress: Like most CRIs, the reel change marks were burned in – I wanted those removed, as they were intrusive and quite unattractive. And for some reason, the end credits were not in good shape – there were large (and I mean huge) orange and green emulsion scratches on either side of the credits and they ran the entire length of the credits. At some point, some replacement footage had been cut in and whoever did it must have done a tango on the negative during the end credits. I told the clean up guys to do their best on those two things, and the rest was just easy scratch removal (again, the CRI was very clean) and a little dirt removal (there wasn't all that much – you can never get all of it, and most transfers don't). I went in and watched it and amazingly they'd gotten rid of all those huge emulsion scratches – not a trace of them anywhere – I couldn't believe it – and they also got rid of all the cue marks. There were a few scratches left in the main titles and going into the first few shots – they were minor – and there were a few scratches where reels were joined – I booked another couple of hours and we got rid of those.

Happily, there were a couple of *Nudie Musical* fans at Foto-Kem and when they saw the results of the new transfer they could not believe that the film looked this good. That was my seal of approval. So, keeping in mind the film's budget and how it was shot, I'm hoping you'll be as pleased with this digital restoration as I am. We finally have *Nudie Musical* looking the way we always wanted it to.

A note about the ratio: The film was projected in 1.85 in theaters. That framing was always a hair too tight for my tastes. Using a negative yields a little more side information than you get with theatrical prints (the soundtrack covers up that side information on prints), and so we opted to open it up to 1.78 because with the extra side information it actually kind of kept the 1.85 look. It was also more pleasing aesthetically, and we also knew that overscan on most TVs would make it closer to 1.85 anyway.

— Bruce Kimmel